

Transformative Professional Development: Negotiating Knowledge with an Inquiry Stance

Knowledgeable teachers are what matter most for students' literacy achievement.

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"The South Carolina Reading Initiative is not 'make and take.' It is having teachers look within themselves, examine their philosophy of teaching, and challenge it." This statement by a South Carolina literacy coach was written after partici-

pating for three years in the South Carolina Reading Initiative (SCRI), a long-term professional development initiative designed to help teachers investigate research-based literacy practices and to build a knowledge base from which to inform instruc-

tional decisions. Building from and in collaboration with the National Council of Teachers of English Reading Initiative, South Carolina teacher educators worked with our State Department of Education to create the South Carolina Reading



Initiative. SCRI is a multi-year professional development project, currently spanning teachers in grades K–8. Participants (and that number exceeds 3,000) work in cohorts that stay together for three or four years and are led by a teaching team of University faculty. More specifically, the teaching team works directly with literacy coaches who study together for three weeks each summer and for two days per month during the school year. Literacy coaches, in turn, facilitate bi-monthly site-based study groups and work in the classrooms of participating teachers.

At the core of SCRI's design is the belief that knowledgeable teachers are what matter most for students' literacy achievement (Darling-Hammond, 1996, 2000; Allington, 2002). This knowledge is best developed over time within the complexities of classrooms and schools. Research suggests that long-term site-based staff development should provide opportunities for teachers to (1) deeply engage in the learning process; (2) build from their current knowledge and practices; (3) examine their beliefs and practices with the intent of transforming knowledge and practice; and (4) investi-

gate their own questions, live their answers, and pose new questions in order to develop knowledge that is grounded in theory and practice (Richardson & Placier, 2001).

To build on this research and achieve the goals of SCRI (see Figure 1) within its research-based constructivist framework, the teaching team created a supportive context designed to foster community, develop trusting relationships, and highlight demonstration, engagement, and reflection (Donnelly, Crowder, Stephens & Hamel, 2002). We believe such an environment cultivates the professional voice of

Year 1

Literacy coaches will *develop an understanding* about:

- How children learn oral and written language in varying sociocultural contexts; how to value and help children make connections between home and school literacies; and why these understandings are critical for teachers of *learners of all ages*;
- Inquiry into the reading process (what proficient readers do to be able to read proficiently) including an introduction to cue systems, reading strategies and modified miscue analysis or running records;
- Inquiry into the writing process (what proficient writers do to be able to write successfully across contexts) including an introduction to formal and informal writing;
- How to create rich literacy environments;
- Using literacy as a tool for learning;
- Specific instructional strategies that support reading and writing (e.g., read aloud, independent reading and writing, shared reading, as well as reading/writing conferences and why they are critical to supporting literacy growth);
- Building professional learning communities that encourage risk taking and honor individual voices.

Year 2

Literacy coaches will *build familiarity with* the following:

- Getting to know children as individual readers and writers (using assessment to inform practice);
- Introducing and practicing miscue analysis and running record;
- Deepening inquiry into the reading and writing processes and related practices and strategies;
- Teaching for strategies across the day (one-to-one, small groups, and whole class);

- Revisiting standards;
- Understanding, envisioning, and exploring literature study;
- Introducing and practicing principles of coaching that will be further explored across other courses.

Year 3

Literacy coaches will *broaden and deepen understanding* of theories and practices that:

- Broaden and deepen understanding of year one and two goals
- Understand, envision, and explore the strategic use of reading and writing workshop as curricular frameworks;
- Understand, envision, and explore inquiry-based learning (using conversation, reading, and writing as tools for learning);
- Make flexible instructional decisions from assessment data;
- Develop supportive learning communities that encourage risk taking and honor individual voices.

Year 4

Literacy coaches will *broaden and deepen understanding* of theories and practices that:

- Best support readers and writers while continuing to develop the capacity to successfully coach classroom teachers and administrators;
- Consistently demonstrate the process of assessment that informs instruction;
- Consistently implement the goals of Years One, Two, and Three;
- Identify and investigate a professional inquiry topic;
- Support learning communities that take risks and honor individual voices.

Figure 1. South Carolina Reading Initiative Goals, Years 1–4

coaches and that professional voice is critical. Literacy coaches and teachers who can articulate their beliefs about literacy instruction are positioned to influence decisions about literacy in their schools, state, and nation. And the voices of knowledgeable, competent literacy coaches and teachers help ensure that decisions made about curriculum and instruction are decisions that best serve the needs of children.

Helping coaches develop a knowledge base and make sound instructional decisions required that the teaching team accept responsibility to work with coaches over an extended period of time and design a context to support the simultaneous exploration of theory and practice. We envisioned our responsibility by creating a model that would guide our work. In this article we introduce our model, and then share stories about ourselves and literacy coaches as learners. These stories highlight four engagements that we believe capture the transformative nature of this professional development experience.

THE MODEL: MAKING OUR BELIEFS VISIBLE

The *Professional as Learner* model (Figure 2) portrays the dynamic interactions among individuals, materials, and social forces within the professional community of learners.

- The **Teacher** is the Teaching Team Member, the Literacy Coach, or the SCRI participant who is conducting literacy instruction and who addresses and forms questions throughout the day as a function of meeting his or her intentions.
- **Teaching** is the act of creating and implementing inquiry-based curriculum. Curriculum is negotiated between and among the literary

concepts/content, knowledge of individual, the learners themselves, and knowledge of learning theory and best practices. Teaching is responsive to learners and it is impacted by them.

- **Learning** occurs dynamically as participants in the teaching/learning context engage in inquiry. Learning results in a shift in literacy beliefs, goals, and practices.
- The continuous shifts in beliefs and practices are suggested by overlapping darker circles.
- **Inquiry** is the connective thread and change force that holds the greatest potential for transformative learning and teaching. It is a transactive force that propels the teacher, teaching, and learning.
- The **context** includes numerous and varied demonstrations, engagements, acts of reflection, and professional materials (professional articles, books, videos, assessment

materials) that form a supportive environment in which the professional community grows.

LIVING OUR MODEL

Living this model means that we are charged as teaching team members with designing engagements for literacy coaches that help them critically examine their beliefs and practices in the context of theory and research. These experiences help coaches refine and expand what they currently know and understand about literacy learning. The teaching team believes that through engagements, debriefing opportunities, and personal reflection, “ah-ha” or breakthrough moments occur and coaches’ learning shifts. While critical incidents that bring about these shifts vary considerably from cohort to cohort, we have come to understand that it is not so much the engagement that develops professional voice. Rather,

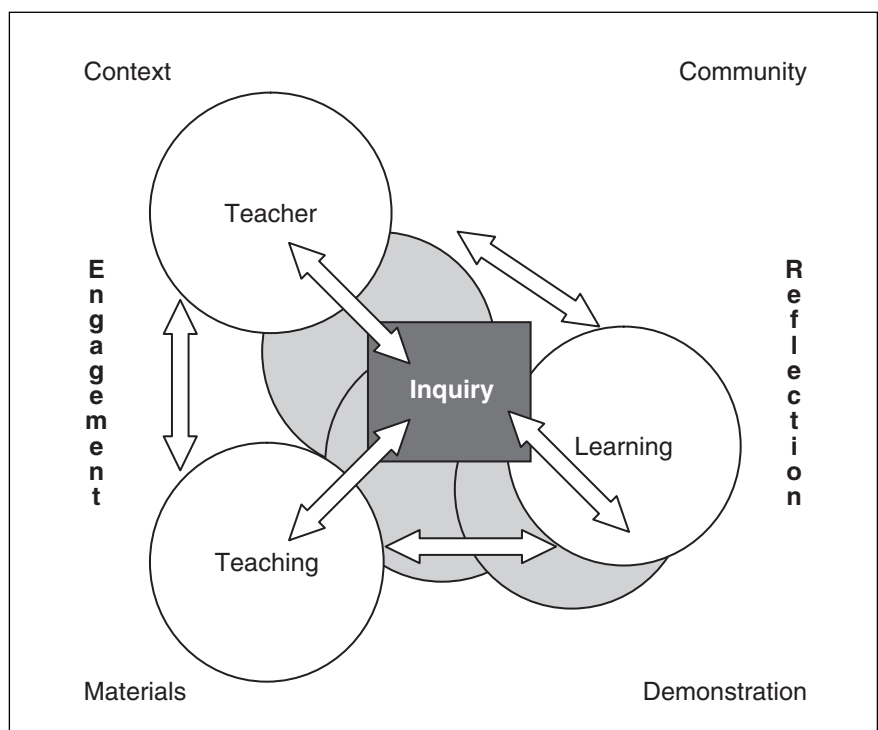


Figure 2. Professional as Learner

it is the conversation surrounding these engagements that helps coaches move beyond their current understandings. The four stories we share are consistent with our belief that transformation can only occur if time and space are available for ongoing conversation. As teaching team members, we are dedicated to not only examining our beliefs in relation to our actions, but also to interrogating the dynamics of our learning community. The first vignette highlights an intentional decision to have coaches capture their daily insights and struggles in order to better understand themselves as learners and to illuminate the experiences that made a difference in their learning.

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Heidi Mills: Making the Implicit, Explicit: Ethnographer's Notebook

I have been teaching teachers for more than 20 years, and along the way I have learned that in order to understand a process, it is absolutely necessary to live the process. I have also learned that living the process is necessary but not sufficient. It is equally important that we interrogate our own learning experiences to make our implicit beliefs and understandings explicit. One year into SCRI, I chose to use an Ethnographer's Notebook as a means of facilitating this interrogation. I chose an Ethnographer's Notebook because I believed it would:

- promote an inquiry stance toward coaching;
- illuminate a deeper understanding of the principles and practices that underpinned our SCRI community;
- help coaches learn to capture and reflect upon the relationship between the context, demonstrations, engagements, content, and materials used in the initiative;

- encourage coaches to learn to coach while coaching to learn;
- help coaches learn to write while writing to learn; and,
- Support coaches in learning to see people and practices in our own community with new eyes.

Each day we met, a coach was randomly selected to be the ethnographer. Once selected, the ethnographer took extensive notes and photographs and also collected artifacts of learning. The task of the ethnographer was to capture, interpret, and share insights regarding the ways in which we come to know personally and collectively as a group. The ethnographer was to share what we know (content), how we know (process, practices), and what we value (ways of being, principles) in our particular culture (note taking to note making). That evening, the selected ethnographer identified key features of the day, insights, and significant interaction patterns in the Ethnographer's Notebook. The next time the group met, the ethnographer opened the day by reading (or performing) the entry from the notebook. The coaches responded by celebrating and contemplating the content as well as the form of each entry. Initially, the coaches acted as if being the ethnographer was a dreadful role, but once they had been the ethnographer, they consistently said the process pushed them to think and write in new ways.

The notebook grew and changed just as we did as coaches and writers. Each entry reflected the coach's voice, significant learning moments, and his/her stance in our learning community. Many ethnographers chose to report out by cloning an author or a book (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996). When cloning a book, authors use the pattern of a pub-

lished book and, in so doing, they are given "direct apprenticeship in writing in the style of another more masterful author" (NCTE Reading Initiative, 2000, p.113). One coach cloned *All I Need to Learn about Life I Learned in Kindergarten* (Fulghum, 1988):

All I Needed to Learn about Life I Learned from SCRI:

. . . Get comfortable being uncomfortable.

Hang out with a brilliant teacher.

Know what you believe.

It's all about the invitation.

The questions we ask make all the difference in the world.

Don't divorce kids from what they already know.

Seek to understand rather than judge. . . .

The coaches grew as teacher-researchers and as writers as they explored the essence of SCRI content and strategies. One coach created an alphabet book, excerpted below, portraying insights generated within our group as we learned about assessment and the potential of the Hypothesis Test (HT) process (Stephens & Story, 2000) to better understand individual children as readers.

C is for conceal. Assessment instruments have the ability to conceal, as well as reveal, certain things . . .

F is for focused. Consider your observations and speculate upon their meaning . . .

I is for interpretations. Interpretations derive from observations. They are interesting and intriguing, not judgmental . . .

L is for looking at Hypothesis Test with new eyes and with our eyes wide open . . .

More important, we grew to better understand and appreciate the unique role and contributions each member of our cohort made to our

learning community. Another coach cloned *The Important Book* (Brown, 1990):

... Another important thing about our cohort is that we are insightful. Roselyn uses questions to look deeply into the reading behaviors of children of all ages. Of course, we only generated more questions. ... Finally, the most important thing about our cohort is that we have this unique opportunity to be ethnographers and to share the author's chair ... this assignment helped me to develop my writer's craft as I use this "simple displacement of words" (a poetry strategy we had recently explored together). ...

Although each entry addressed the content and strategies featured in our cohort, each entry also highlighted members of our cohort and the unique contributions they made to our thought collective. Our professional community blossomed because of this tool. We looked forward to this critical moment each day and celebrated the brilliance of the ethnographer, the writer's craft displayed, and

the substantive nature of the professional conversations that pervaded our culture. It helped us seek to understand "in the midst" and "after the fact" (Power, 1996). The majority of coaches found it so meaningful that they transferred the ritual into their own teacher study groups. The Ethnographer's Notebook served us all well. It was a gift that nurtured our hearts and minds; a gift that my coaches and I now use to reminisce about our time together.

Ethnographer's Notebooks helped coaches look and listen closely to the learning process. In so doing, coaches were able to name important practices and principles generated through their work together. By using tools like an Ethnographer's Notebook, we learned that it is important to slow down and examine learning within the cohort to understand the power of conversations, demonstrations, and engagements happening in our midst. As a teaching team, we knew, however, that developing and internalizing a pro-

fessional voice demands outside experiences such as attending conferences, putting ourselves in new learning situations, and using writing to reflect upon these experiences. One cohort experienced all three.

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Susi Long: More Than Just a Conference

I walked into the hotel lobby and there they were, all of those familiar faces that I had come to know. Just a few short months ago, most of us had never laid eyes on one another and, now, here we were in Ohio ... greeting one another with smiles, hugs, and feelings of expectation for things we were going to see, learn, and experience.

—Literacy Coach

During the first six months, 50 coaches (two cohorts) traveled to national conferences, including NCTE in Atlanta and The Ohio State University Children's Literature Conference in Columbus. Affirming the belief that interactions within and beyond our cohort communities were critical to examining personal and professional perspectives, conference experiences influenced our learning in remarkable ways or, as one coach wrote, attending conferences "helped us grow into new creatures of language and literacy." The impact of conference events seemed to build from specific engagements and structures (before, during, and after the conferences) that supported coaches in taking risks to explore deeper meanings and to question existing beliefs.

Prior to attending conferences, structures that supported coaches in reading, talking, and experimenting with new ideas had become integral to our cohort lives. Coaches regularly discussed professional literature and children's books in relation to work with children



and teachers. In the process, they became familiar with and developed a deep admiration for ideas, authors, and experts beyond our community. During conferences, coaches were able to use that knowledge to make informed choices about sessions that had the potential to further their understandings. Familiarity with authors and ideas also helped them feel a part of a larger professional community. As one coach wrote, the combination of prior knowledge and conference experiences made her feel as if she had “fallen into the company of movers and shakers.”

As we read, talked, and tried new ideas prior to conferences, we also began experimenting with Writer’s Notebooks. Coaches used Writer’s Notebooks for the first time as they explored their own life stories and as they recorded thoughts, ideas, and images from their teaching and learning lives. At conferences, coaches used Writer’s Notebooks to capture the process of their own learning. They jotted down quotes that provoked new thinking, thoughts about specific curricular structures, and images of experiences. Suggested questions provided an initial framework for reflection:

- What ideas, words, and perspectives capture your thinking?
- What is it about this session that creates an impact for you?
- What lines do you want to shout from the rooftops?
- What does this make you think about in relation to your own teaching and learning?

Soon, coaches moved far beyond these structures and reflected in ways that met their unique needs. For many, Writer’s Notebooks became second nature. One coach wrote that

after listening to an author in Ohio, she “had an intense desire to get five minutes of quiet time to myself so I could write in my notebook.” Another coach, valuing her Writer’s Notebook as a place to relish the moment purposefully, said, “I want to savor these thoughts so I can take them back to children and teachers.”

During each conference, opportunities to reflect through conversations with one another were both intentionally planned and spontaneously grasped. As cohorts, we met together on-site at the beginning of each conference to touch base, bring familiarity to unfamiliar sur-

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roundings, and suggest sessions to one another. Conversational reflections began with these sessions but reached far beyond them as coaches chatted in hallways, mulled over ideas in the hotel bar, and talked over breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

While attending the Children’s Literature Conference, we visited local schools. Concepts, attitudes, and practices explored prior to the trip came to life through interactions with teachers and children in schools. Describing her visit to Indianola Elementary School as a personal turning point, one coach wrote about the power of “seeing it for yourself”:

Can you believe it? First graders talking and sharing stories about including climax in their writing. It really blew my mind. I had to see it for myself to know that young students do have a voice in writing that we truly need to tap into.

For many, the school visits gave validity to what they were learning and trying in their own classrooms. Another coach wrote: “I got a brief glimpse into what it must be like to teach at a school with a shared vision. The children in this school are truly engaged in literacy. They are living the practices we are learning about.”

Opportunities to experience life in new ways were also critical to the learning that coaches took away from conferences. Urged to take time to enjoy being in a new place with new foods, new sights, and new possibilities for experience, coaches ate in interesting restaurants, went Salsa dancing, visited local museums, and even met Lou Rawls in the hotel bar. Coaches wrote repeatedly about how these opportunities were critical to broadening world views and building relationships that strengthened the foundation for further learning: “On this trip, I learned that we have each brought something to this partnership that makes it feel as if we have known each other forever.”

Coaches returned home full of ideas, stronger in their convictions, and anxious to integrate deepened beliefs in their work in schools. We found that it was essential to make time right away to capture not only curricular ideas but the spirit and sense of empowerment that conference experiences engendered. Structures were created on cohort listservs for posting and responding to ah-hahs, questions, favorite quotes, and ideas. After the Ohio trip, we used a writing strategy that asked coaches to “explode” specific conference moments. The writing was compiled into a cohort volume, an engagement that brought learning to a new level as we “breathed in deeply all the richness of the experience made more rich by reliving it.”

Looking at the Year One goals for our initiatives, it is clear that conference experiences allowed coaches to own their learning across goals. Supported by specific structures and engagements, they sought understandings based on their own moments in the learning process. They returned to schools and experimented in new ways with curricular structures (craft lessons, book making, integrating the arts, using literacy across the day, literacy centers, poetry journals, building book rooms, and small flexible groupings). More important, conference experiences allowed coaches to further develop professional voice and to recognize that they were not alone. Affirmation that they “were on the right track” and in “good company” gave them renewed energy and courage to persevere. Experiences that were more than just a conference led to the realization that our small gathering of voices was a part of a much larger gathering of voices also committed to affecting change.

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Extending coaches’ visions of a professional community is an intentional instructional strategy. By providing opportunities for coaches to interact with other educators across our country, coaches built relationships as well as affirmed and extended their growing beliefs. At the same time, new questions were raised. Through Susi’s initial support and encouragement to reach outside themselves, these coaches began to take on greater responsibility for their own learning and to adopt more fully the role of coach. Designing learning experiences beyond the cohort and state nudged coaches to take personal and professional risks and to understand that honoring individual voices happens even in larger professional communities. Helping coaches find a niche in a

larger professional community strengthens our profession and supports coaches’ shifts toward a learner-centered curriculum. As learners reflect on themselves and on the learning process, and as they extend their learning communities, tension often emerges as a response to the influx of new ideas. In another cohort, coaches experienced the natural tension in learning as a call to

lar plan, a focused inquiry project, highlighted an aspect of their teaching that they wanted to create or change in light of their new knowledge. The coaches created an intentional teaching plan, grounded in research, that helped them continuously interrogate and document their growing beliefs and practice. In doing so, coaches experienced the natural struggle that all teachers

If we remain in the state of not knowing what we don’t know, we run the risk of blindly teaching programs and hand-me-down curriculum.

change as they developed a curricular plan by using their new insights.

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Janet Files: Healthy Tension

“I feel like such a new teacher. I’ve taught for fifteen years, I’ve actually been selected as a mentor teacher, but I didn’t know there was so much to know about teaching kids to read and write!”

—Literacy Coach

In the SCRI Middle Grades cohort, the coaches experienced the healthy tension of trying to negotiate old and new beliefs about teaching and learning. Coaches were used to a culture of school and teaching in which curriculum was based on programs, not curriculum created by knowledgeable practitioners. They were inspired to change their curriculum but needed a structure to focus their energies so they could “zoom in” on practice as well as reflect on the results. They were trying some strategies and engagements, but we knew they needed a more intentional plan to focus their learning. Therefore, toward the end of our first semester of learning, we asked literacy coaches to write a focused individualized curricular plan tailored for their own students for the following semester. The curricu-

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Professional Development in Your Pajamas?

When asked to explain the best thing about using the Internet for professional development, one first-grade teacher admitted, "I can 'attend' staff development in my pajamas!" Her declaration was immediately supported by her colleagues who commented on the convenience of an on-demand, anytime, anyplace access to professional development resources online. These educators have discovered how the Internet can play a fundamental role in meeting the teacher technology standards of the International Society for Technology Education, I.S.T.E.

Using Technology Resources for Ongoing Professional Development and Lifelong Learning

- Many sites offer online tutorials that focus on specific literacy instructional strategies. The Mariposa County Unified School District Web site (<http://www.sps3000.net/mariposa/>) provides a small collection of online staff development tutorials that were originally designed for a summer technology workshop.
- Education World's site (http://www.educationworld.com/a_tech/techtorial/techtorial002.shtml) offers a larger collection of resources on topics that include technology connections to the curriculum, distance learning, interactivity, Internet use, Internet projects, teaching templates, technology planning, techtorials, and Web Quests.
- Professional journal articles and position statements for reading individually or in study groups are available through many professional organization Web sites. For example, view articles at Reading Online (http://www.readingonline.org/articles/art_index.asp), an organizational position statement at National Association for Education of Young Children (<http://www.naeyc.org/resources/eyly/1996/09a.htm>), and the Education Technology Standards for Teachers (http://cnets.iste.org/teachers/t_stands.html) (ISTE, 2000). The I.S.T.E. site also offers lesson plans, teacher profiles, and student technology standards.

Evaluating and Reflecting on Professional Practice

- The National Council of Teachers of English Web site (<http://www.ncte.org/profdev>) offers a variety of re-

search-based opportunities for professional development to foster teachers' abilities to evaluate, reflect on, and communicate with peers about professional practices. CoLEARN is a year-long inquiry module for K-16 teachers that includes a flexible series of readings and writings.

- The NCTE site also provides opportunities for a unique online style of mentoring that involves asking questions and learning from highly respected professionals in the literacy field. *Read Write Think*, a partnership between NCTE, The International Reading Association (I.R.A.), and the MarcoPolo Educational foundation, presents a forum for exchanging ideas and opportunities to reflect on practice.

Using Technology to Communicate and Collaborate with Peers and the Larger Community

- Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) involves any form of electronic communication, such as e-mail, audio, text, discussion forums, and bulletin boards, that is exchanged between two or more people interacting through separate computers. One of the most popular and easily accessible CMC formats for connecting with peers in the larger community is a listserv.
- RTEACHER, a listserv of IRA (<http://www.reading.org/index.html>) connects educators who are interested in issues of literacy in elementary classrooms. The listserv is based on mutual support, tolerance for diverse perspectives, recognition that those perspectives provide opportunities to support one another, and a belief in the important role of the classroom teacher of reading. Directions for joining the listserv (<http://www.reading.org/virtual/rteacherdirections.html> retrieved 10-5-2004) are well articulated and easy to follow.

If you haven't yet utilized Internet resources for professional development, try out one or two ideas listed in this sidebar. Doing so will entitle you to become the newest online member of the "Pajama Professional Development Brigade."

Linda D. Labbo

We also had read and discussed different perspectives and research on best practices in light of new knowledge and thought through theoretical support for new practices. Using this information, the literacy coaches created their curricular plans articulating their touchstone beliefs and the theory that underlies the practices. They stated teaching goals based on student needs, created an instructional vision, and then chose a new practice or workshop frame to “grow into.” The plan involved making a predictable framework for their day and naming goals for the students as well as specific engagements and organizational structures to teach into. The “how” had to be grounded in the “why” from theory and research. The coaches also listed professional and instructional resources that supported them theoretically and extended their curriculum. Examples of the curricular plans included Writing Workshop with a Unit of Study on Memoir, Read-Aloud, Independent Reading, and Literature Discussion Groups. The plan provided a focus for a natural action-reflection-new action learning cycle that could enliven and enrich our training session conversations and ground it in the real flesh and bones of actual teaching. Once the plans were complete, the coaches began implementation. As they did so, they kept a reflective log to help them see the effect of their teaching and adjust plans to come closer to their goals. Just a few weeks into the process, SCRI goals were illuminated as coaches commented on the value of the plans and of the reflective logs:

My curricular plan helped me focus. Once I actually put the plans in writing for how to teach the new-to-me practice of literature circles, I felt committed to enacting them; I had

to move past my fears. Writing the plan showed me that I do know some things and can rely on my knowledge.

The research, reading, and thought that went into my plan allows me to teach the way I believe is best without worrying what others like administrators might think. If asked, I can explain the theory and research behind my choices that are best for the students.

The coaches began to understand teaching and learning as an inquiry cycle. They saw how the curricular plan helped them name and question their beliefs and practices and develop a teaching voice that can clearly articulate why their teaching practice is best for students. They were also becoming more comfortable with the tension that accompanies learning. At the end of the semester, literacy coaches became so confident in their ability to articulate their process and intentions for creating curriculum that they made public their “learning stories” to the cohort. As Brian Cambourne (2003) tells us:

We have exquisitely good reasons for doing what we do, for believing what we believe. But unless we are actively curious about them, we will never discover what those reasons are. And unless we know what they are, we cannot ask ourselves if they are still true or helpful or protective, if they are as relevant today as when we first developed them.

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By developing a curricular plan to help coaches outgrow old beliefs and practices, literacy coaches interrogated their assumptions about teaching and learning. By constantly reflecting on their curricular plan and intended goals, literacy coaches experienced the value of reflection and how it shapes prac-

tice. Reflection is not only a teaching tool that facilitates coaches’ development; it is also the process we live in order to become more responsive teachers. Reflection fuels the inquiry process and shapes the foundation of professional voice.

There comes a point, however, when coaches, like all learners and teachers, need to begin developing structures for themselves rather than depending on those developed for them (e.g., Ethnographer’s Notebook, conference frameworks, curricular plans). Intentionally turning toward others (Lindfors, 1999) illuminates teaching as an act of inquiry and illustrates how a cohort can collectively analyze and create solutions that will not only benefit individuals, but also serve the good of the community. In the next story, coaches come face to face with their assumptions about teaching and learning as they navigate rough waters associated with taking responsibility for their learning.

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Diane DeFord: Rough Waters, Calm Reflections

Within learning, there are moments of struggle in which we come to realize that we need to direct our own learning. It was during the second year of SCRI that I talked with coaches about “co-planning” our upcoming year so that they could have an opportunity to direct their own learning. I believe that personal investment increases ownership and that co-planning honors coaches’ learning needs and develops professional voice. I also believe this instructional decision fosters greater risk taking among the coaches and that risk taking is essential to learning. By including coaches in the curricular decision making, I intentionally demonstrated following the needs of the

learners. By living this “theory in action,” this decision demonstrated how coaches can scaffold their teachers’ learning in similar ways as they conduct their study groups.

We met in small groups to decide on topics to explore for the upcoming year and to develop possible time frames. I wanted coaches to help define the structures and routines for our cohort and to name professional literature they wanted to read. Based on their discussions, I identified four structures that would be present in each meeting:

- time for professional book club discussions
- introduction of new material
- introduction of new children’s books
- time to celebrate study group experiences.

A daily structure common to all cohorts is the use of Exit Slips. These guided reflections ask coaches to comment at the end of the day on factors such as new

What we came to understand was that each coach had different expectations and beliefs about “teaching and learning.” Some of the coaches felt strongly that they should only learn from me, and I should be more direct about what I wanted them to know and learn. Others valued learning from each other and felt our group studies were beneficial. Others wanted an agenda that we stuck to, and still others wanted more handouts and step-by-step descriptions of successful instructional activities. As a group, we decided to expand Exit Slips to create a structure that gave coaches time in the morning to individually reflect and pose personal questions to guide their learning throughout that day.

During the day, the coaches added answers to their questions, wrote new insights, and posed additional questions on this slip. I gathered these slips at the end of the day to help me plan our next meeting. These “Entrance to Exit Slips” helped coaches focus their learning and take

and essential to meeting the needs of individual learners. It is only through having the hard conversations and openly investigating what works and what doesn’t that coaches fully develop their professional voices.

By openly evaluating our dilemma and deciding how we might change paths, we realized the power of discussion and reflection and came to learn that each member’s comments and questions were vital to individual and group understandings. This helped the coaches take responsibility for guiding me to meet their needs. We successfully traversed rough water and found calm through open discussion and reflection.

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REFLECTING UPON OUR MODEL

While our stories share powerful moments in our learning, our work did not happen without tensions and challenges. This work is not easy. Asking educators to critically examine their beliefs and practices and to challenge their thinking of teaching and learning often caused cognitive dissonance. The literacy coaches were initially uncomfortable learning in a context in which there were more questions than answers and where they were in charge of shaping their own answers based on their unique school situation. Coaches typically experienced one-day solutions about how to help children as readers and writers. As teaching team members, we deliberately moved at a slower pace to encourage deeper and more thoughtful investigation of research-based practices. Literacy coaches, employed by school districts, had to work within school-wide programs and practices as well as redefine their roles as they led their own study groups with teachers at their school sites. They had to renegotiate their roles as they

It is only through having the hard conversations and openly investigating what works and what doesn’t that coaches fully develop their professional voices.

learning, insights, connections, and questions related to the day’s learning. This feedback allowed me to further understand their needs as learners. Up to that point, the coaches’ Exit Slips indicated the sessions were meeting their needs. By the middle of the third year, however, I began to sense some unrest. Some of the group seemed to want me to “do more.” Because we made the commitment to co-plan the year, I turned to them to help solve this feeling of unrest, and opened the discussion with the coaches.

responsibility to answer their questions as well as to critically think about applications these experiences would have in their work with teachers. It was only in the process of “making the known strange” that the coaches understood that they had different expectations of how co-planning would look in practice. This process helped the coaches realize that developing common language and striving to follow the needs of the learners is critical to new literacy understandings. We also learned that discussions along the way are critical to interrogating current assumptions

helped colleagues realize that they were not going to be teachers with a capital T but rather facilitators of group conversations. As teaching team members leading the cohorts, we confronted our own deeper beliefs about learning and the connection of our beliefs to practice. Through constant reflection on our teaching, we are learning to become more caring and responsive teachers. In helping others to find their professional voices, we are simultaneously developing and listening to our own voice. In spite of many bumps in the road, we all feel a great sense of renewal and energy when we come together as cohorts each month. Coaches and teaching team members all remark about how monthly meetings are safe havens where we can work through internal and external challenges. While it is some of the hardest work we have ever done, it is the kind that professionally renews and invigorates us.

When we started SCRI, we imagined what could be possible in the name of professional development. Now we know the realities and the complexities of making dreams come true (Morgan, Saylor-Crowder, Stephens, Donnelly, DeFord, & Hamel, 2003). We hope the following questions will help others consider ways to make their professional development dreams a reality:

- How can you modify this model for use within your own school or with other teachers at your grade level?
- How can you make professional development long-term and site-based?
- With whom can you collaborate? Other colleagues? Professional groups? Agencies?
- How can you articulate your beliefs about research-based practices and inquiry?

- What opportunities will you design to help teachers explore, experiment, reflect, and articulate their practice and beliefs through dialogue with others?
- What kind of space and materials will you need to support your work?

As we hope these stories made clear, SCRI is not about one way of thinking, living, or being. Rather SCRI is an alchemy of many internal changes taking place simultaneously among individuals who are transforming within communities that are transforming. Across multiple contexts, participants use research, theory, and practice to construct knowledge related to their questions and the questions of their peers. Literacy coaches have multiple and varied learning experiences grounded in dialogue, observation, and inquiry within a supportive context to examine their beliefs and practices. As coaches come to own their knowledge, they develop a professional voice. This voice is nurtured through carefully crafted engagements and demonstrations within an inquiry stance and community. Each of these changes are transforming. In the words of two SCRI literacy coaches: "Words cannot express my growth. I feel it in my heart. You see it in my eyes. Thank you! This has been a life changing experience!"

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